

## *The Panhandler Project*

### Project Statement

#### *Photographs*



#### *Video*



**EXHIBIT 23-A  
TO DECLARATION OF  
WILLIAM LIVINGSTON**

## *The Panhandler Project*

The Panhandler Project began about a year after a student of mine decided to create a body of work involving the homeless. My immediate reaction was to warn him of the problems inherent in any undertaking involving a marginalized population, and to be careful of the language he used in talking about what he wanted to do when he spoke with the administrative people in the organization he had decided to work with. I automatically began "protecting" the homeless participants of the project by letting my student know there was a politically correct way to speak and behave when dealing with the homeless. Academics know what I mean -- the politically correct conversation where nobody could possibly be offended; the conversation where the pronoun "them" is not to be used; the politically correct situation where we have to protect "them" even though there is no collective "them" and even though the idea of protection is in itself a remnant of a rather odious colonizing attitude. I was responding in the typical, liberal, hyper-sensitive, white, academically correct mode that had been established over the past 30 years in parallel with the politically correct language of feminism and identity politics.

To make a long story short, my student returned to class after making initial contacts, and the world as it really is came back with him. He related how "they" were, and how others in the business of helping "them" talked about "them". My PC sensibilities were not just shaken; they were exposed as being useless. Worse than that, I began to see this attitude and the language used to make its case was more dangerous to the people involved than whatever damage it was meant to prevent.

Along with the language, for photographers there is also the added responsibility of representation. How are marginalized homeless people to be represented? "Just don't" seems to be the current solution. Although I am well aware of the pitfalls in making a homeless person the subject or object of a photograph, the regulatory nature of the invectives against doing so close down pertinent discussions of agency in regard to race and class. Most problematic is the assumption made by many cultural and photographic theorists that this segment of the population is incapable of giving informed consent about the use of their image. It has become routine to denounce such images as exploitive and objectifying, based on the predictable and unexamined illusion the art world and PC liberals like to entertain - that homeless and marginalized people everywhere are a protected class of victims. I don't believe academia is really interested in providing anything but the faulty logic of protectionist rhetoric that further marginalizes already marginalized people.

This ethical and aesthetic dilemma provides the subtext of my recently completed Panhandler Project, a series of photographs and video documentation of 5 male panhandlers from Chicago, all of whom are homeless and African American, who I asked to model for me nude. My process was to randomly meet the men on the street, and through discussion, determine if they were willing to participate in the project. The compensation for spending the day with me was \$100, lunch and dinner, new clothing, and a hotel room for the night. The hotel room was the location of the shoot. After the shoot, the model was interviewed and we discussed his reactions to the experience. The man then signed a model release, and was left to spend the night in the hotel. In the morning, I picked him up, paid him in cash, took him to breakfast, and dropped him off wherever he wanted to go. Video documentation took place through the entire photo shoot and into the evening until I left the hotel.

Even though my desire as an artist is to make the photographic images beautiful as works of art, they are actually only the by-product of the process involved in the project. I'm much more interested in the video and the conversation/debate/argument that the two forms of visual representation have the potential to create. It is always easier to argue theoretically on either side about the abstract nature of representation and what images mean. However, my intent is to reconfigure the debate to include the subjects of the photographs and video, who have become the objects in an argument that never directly involves them.

Another subtext revolves around issues of class and race - the thorny problems that make most white folks crazy. Being educated, liberal, hyper-sensitive, and until about 3 years ago, determined to be politically correct, one of my biggest fears was saying or doing something that could be considered racist. In thinking about why I did this project, I found that I was interested in putting myself in situations in which I would have to confront my incorrect political correctness. I wanted to see if my fears and discomfort about "sounding" or even being racist in my assumptions and language had some real basis or if it was fueled by the years of PC training I had undergone in academia. Thus my challenge: to create a work so seemingly politically incorrect that it causes, in fact, demands a response.

Nudity in American culture, particularly male nudity, and in this case, specifically the nudity of African-American men, continues to be a contentious issue - the height of exploitation and humiliation for many being the exposure of the naked body. This project directly confronts that notion through the production of video documentation and photographs of the 5 men I have asked to model for me. I don't make any pretense to create a cross section of the homeless population in Chicago - there are only 5 men and all are black. My intention is to trouble and question issues of race and who is of the appropriate ethnicity to do what to whom. I'm not trying to make a specific statement, but to create a situation in which the viewer is presented with a certain set of questions, some of which are ethical, others of which will obviously be personal to the viewer. The shoots are highly sexually charged by nature of the male/female dynamic, but in the end, the situation is a business transaction - money and goods in exchange for a professional service.

**EXHIBIT 23-B  
TO DECLARATION OF  
WILLIAM LIVINGSTON**

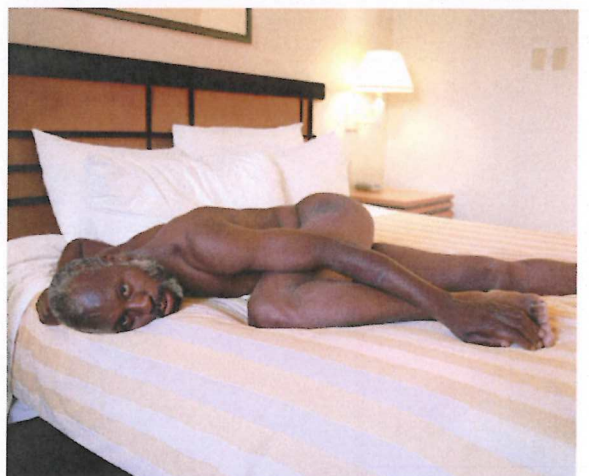
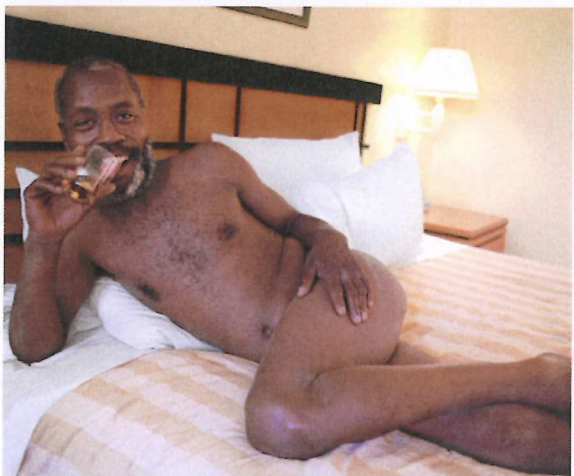
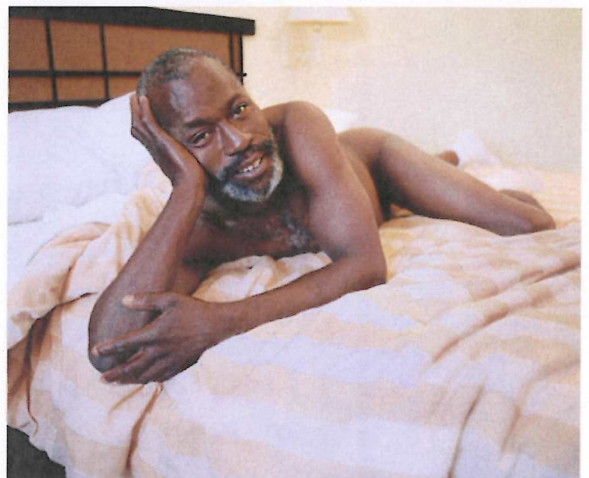
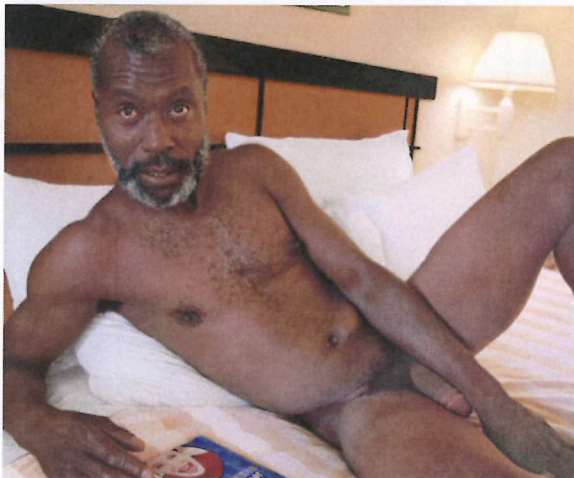
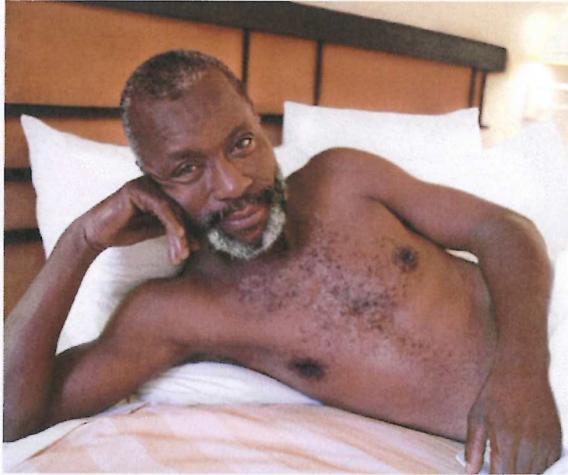


EXHIBIT 23-C  
TO DECLARATION OF  
WILLIAM LIVINGSTON